

Politics & Literature: Literature and Democracy in America

Government 3655
Cornell University
T/Th 11:40-12:55
Baker Lab 119

Professor Jason Frank
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Office Hours: W 10:00-12:00
TA: Jin Gon Park

Course description and aims

What is political authority and how is it constituted? How do narratives enhance authority or subvert it? How do they shape and contest political identity? How and why do political actors in the present negotiate the legacies of past injustice (for example, slavery, colonialism, state violence)? To what extent does the past shape and determine our political present (our sense of self, our relations with others)? And where might we find the cultural resources for resistance and/or political transformation? These are some of the moral and political questions we will pursue in this course. Rather than turning to philosophical treatises or normative argumentation for orientation, however, we will turn instead to prominent works of literature: Hawthorne, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, Faulkner, Ellison, and Rankine (among others). The course will explore the contributions of literature - scripture, novels, essays, short stories, and poetry - to the reflective study of politics, and to the formation of a more thoughtful, critical citizenship. The focus this semester will be on the dynamic and critical relationship between American literature and American democracy, with a special emphasis on the meaning of American exceptionalism, individualism, and the living legacies of violence and racial injustice.

Course requirements

This is a lecture course, but time will be allotted every class meeting for discussion. Students should come to class prepared to engage in lively conversation based on the week's reading. In addition to bringing the pertinent texts to class, students will be asked to write weekly short (1 page) reader responses (reading prompts provided weekly on blackboard). The reader responses should avoid summary, and instead critically engage a particular question or theme. Responses will be turned in at the beginning of each Tuesday class and count as a part of the final participation grade (15% of the total). In addition to these short writing assignments, students will be asked to complete one in-class assignment and two 6-7 page papers. A list of paper topics will be distributed in class one week before each paper is due. All papers must include direct textual citation and notes (details will be provided). The in-class assignment will be worth 15% of the final grade. The papers will each be worth 35%. There is no final exam.

Books to purchase

Available at Cornell Bookstore:

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*
Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*
Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories*
Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*

Readings marked * are available on blackboard.

Weekly Readings

Week 1:

August 25 – Introduction: Literature and Political Inquiry

August 27 – The Book of Exodus and America: Narrative and Collective Identity

The Book of Exodus*

Week 2:

September 1 – The Book of Exodus: Liberation or Freedom?

The Book of Exodus*

September 3 - No Class

Week 3:

September 8 – The Presence of the Past: Hawthorne's Custom House

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

September 10 – Community, Shame, and Politics

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

Week 4:

September 15 – American Individualism and the Imperial Self

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1830)*

September 17 – Self-Reliance and Civil Disobedience

Henry David Thoreau, “On Civil Disobedience” (1849)

Week 5:

September 22 – Solitude and Citizenship: Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

September 24 – Confronting “the Wild”

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

Week 6:

September 29 – Reading (in) *Walden*

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

October 1 – Poetic Democracy

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855)*

Week 7:

October 6 – Melville and Politics

October 8 – Melville and the Pathologies of Freedom

“The Quarter Deck”(1851)*
First paper due.

Week 8:

October 13 – Fall Break

October 15 – Democracy’s Others: Bartleby

Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853)

Week 9:

October 20 – The “Hive of Subtlety”: Race and Revolution

Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1856)

October 22 – “Why Moralize Upon It?” Melville and the Presence of the Past

Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1856)

Week 10:

October 27 – Authority and the Ship of State

Herman Melville, “Billy Budd”(1891)

October 29 – Billy Budd and the Vicissitudes of Political Judgment

Herman Melville, “Billy Budd”(1891)

Week 11:

November 3 – Race and Repudiation: Faulkner

William Faulkner, “The Bear” (1942)

November 5 – Technology and the Mastery of Nature

William Faulkner, “The Bear” (1942)

Week 12:

November 10 – Race and Recognition

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

November 12 – No Class

Week 13:

November 17 – White Supremacy as Ideological Hegemony

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

November 19 – Brotherhood and Democratic Sacrifice

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Week 14:

November 24 – Speaking for Others “on the Lower Frequencies”: Democratic Futures?

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

November 26 – Thanksgiving Break

Week 15:

December 1 – Race and the Intimacy of Power

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

December 3 – Literature and “Citizenship”

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

Final paper due December 8th at noon.